

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2010

Remarks at a Democratic National Committee Meeting

February 6, 2010

Thank you, DNC. Everybody have a seat, have a seat. Thank you. Oh, it is good to see you, good to be among friends so committed to the future of this party and this country that they're willing to brave a blizzard. *[Laughter]* "Snowmageddon" here in DC. *[Laughter]* I noticed somebody had "Californians for Obama," and I was thinking, you guys are not used to this. *[Laughter]*

I've got some special thanks to the folks here. First of all I want to thank Eleanor Holmes Norton for fighting the good fight here in the District of Columbia; Ray Buckley, our DNC vice chair from New Hampshire; Alice Germond, DNC secretary; Andy Tobias, DNC treasurer. Thanks for the great work that you guys do.

I want to thank Tim Kaine, who's not only an outstanding former Governor, but an outstanding leader of this party—busy building the best online and infield grassroots organization we've ever had. Give Tim Kaine a big round of applause.

And if I'm not mistaken, we've got a couple of terrific Members of Congress here, Mike Honda, Congressman and DNC vice chair—Mike, are you here? He's on his way; he's still shoveling. *[Laughter]* And how about Barbara Lee, is Barbara here? Well, we love her anyway. So give Barbara and Mike a big round of applause.

I want to thank the Governors, the legislators, the mayors from across this country for working to move their States and local communities forward in extraordinarily challenging times. They've done heroic work. I want to thank the DNC members, State party leaders, and most of all, I want to thank the millions of Americans who've taken up the cause of change at the grassroots level in all 50 States.

Now, Tim alluded to this, but I just want to remind everybody, we knew from the beginning that this would not be easy. Change never is. But that's especially true in these times, when we face an array of challenges as tough as any we have seen in generations. President Kennedy once said: "When we got into office, the thing that surprised me most was to find that things were just as bad as we'd been saying they were." *[Laughter]* Truth was things were worse.

We took office facing a financial crisis that was something we hadn't seen since the Great Depression, an economy that we now know was bleeding 750,000 jobs a month, a \$1.3 trillion deficit, and two wars that were costly in every sense of the word. From the specter of terrorism to the impacts of globalization, we face tremendous new challenges in this young century. And all of this comes on top of one of the toughest decades our middle class had ever faced, a decade where jobs grew more slowly than during any prior expansion, where the income of the average American household actually declined, where the costs of everything seemed to keep going up.

Everything we've done over the past year has been not only to right our economy, to break the back of this recession, but also to restore some of the security middle class families have felt slipping away for over a decade now. Some of the steps we took were done without the help of the other party, which made a political decision all too often to jump in the backseat, let

us do the driving and then critique whether we were taking the right turns. That's okay. That's part of what it means to govern.

And all the steps we took were necessary. None of us wanted to throw a lifeline to the banks. But the outrage shouldn't be that we did, because it had to happen in order to prevent millions more from losing their jobs, millions of businesses and homes foreclosed. The real outrage is that we had to do it in the first place in order to fend off the collapse of the financial system. That's the outrage.

Then we passed almost \$300 billion in tax relief: tax cuts for small businesses; tax cuts for 95 percent of working Americans. We put Americans to work building the infrastructure of tomorrow, doing the work America needs done. We passed a credit card bill of rights to protect consumers from getting ripped off by credit card companies. We put the law behind the principle of equal pay for equal work. We extended the promise of health care to 4 million more children of working families. We protected every child from being targeted by tobacco companies.

We passed a service bill named for Ted Kennedy that gives young folks and old folks new ways to give back to their communities. We appointed Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court. And we've begun working with Congress and our military to finally repeal the law that denies gay Americans the right to serve the country that they love because of who they are.

Overseas, we've begun a new era of engagement. We're working with our partners to stop the spread of nuclear weapons, and to seek a world free of nuclear weapons. We banned torture. We have begun to leave Iraq to its own people. We've charted a new way forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan and made good progress in taking the fight to Al Qaida across the globe. I went to Cairo on behalf of America to begin a new dialog with the Muslim world. And we are living up to a moment that demands American leadership by standing side by side with the people of Haiti.

So if you look at a tally of the things we said we would do, even in the midst of this extraordinarily challenging economy, we've kept our promises. We've kept our commitments. We have moved forward on behalf of a more prosperous and more secure future for the American people.

But for all our efforts, we have to acknowledge change can't come fast enough for many Americans. In recent weeks, I've visited Allentown, Pennsylvania; Elyria, Ohio; Tampa, Florida; Nashua, New Hampshire, talking with workers in factories and families in diners. And they want to know, how are they going to find a job when they only know one trade in their life? Or how are they going to afford to send their kids to college? How are they going to pay their medical bills when they get sick? How can they retire with their 401(k) so banged up? And most of all, they're wondering if anyone can or will do anything about it, especially here in Washington.

Now, I understand their frustration; you understand it as well. I was talking to Michelle the other day—Michelle is always a good barometer—and, you know, the front page was, oh, what's Obama going to do to get his poll numbers up? And, are the Democrats all in a tizzy and this and that? And she said, "You know, listen, if you're the average family, if I'm a mom out there and I'm working and my husband is working but we're worried about losing our jobs, our hours have been cut back, the cost of our health care premiums just went up 30 percent, the credit card company just jacked up our interest rates 39 percent, and our home values have gone down by \$100,000, our 401(k) is all banged up, and suddenly somebody calls up and says,

'So, how do you think President Obama is doing right now?' [*Laughter*] What are they going to say? What are they going to say?"

Of course people are frustrated. And they have every right to be. And I know that during the course of this gathering, you know, some of the press have been running around, well, what do you think we should be doing, and this and that and the other, and what's the strategy?

Look, when unemployment is 9.7 percent, when we are still digging ourselves out of an extraordinary recession, people are going to be frustrated. And they're going to be looking to the party in power to try to fix it. And when you've got another party that says, we don't want to do anything about it, of course people are going to be frustrated.

Folks are out there working hard every day, trying to meet their responsibilities. But all around them during this last "lost decade," what they've seen is a wave of irresponsibility from Wall Street to Washington. They see a capital city where every day is treated like Election Day and every act, every comment, every gesture passes through a political filter. They've seen the outsized influence of lobbyists and special interests, who too often hijack the agenda by leveraging campaign money and connections. Of course, they wonder if their leaders can muster the will to overcome all of that and confront the real problems that touch their lives.

But here's what everybody here has to remember: That's why I ran for President. That's why you worked so hard to elect a Democratic Congress. We knew this stuff was tough. But we stepped up because we decided we were going to take the responsibility of changing it. And it may not be easy, but change is coming.

I believe so strongly, if we're going to deal with the great challenges of our time, if we're going to secure a better future just as past generations did for us, then we're going to have to change the prevailing politics in this town, and it's not going to be easy. We're going to have to care less about scoring points and more about solving problems that are holding us back. At this defining moment, that's never been more important.

We can continue, for example, to be consumed by the politics of energy. But we know that the nation that leads the clean energy revolution will lead the 21st century global economy. We know that a failure to act will put our planet in deeper peril. We know that China isn't waiting and India isn't waiting and Germany isn't waiting to seize that future, and America can't afford to wait either. And I don't intend to spend all my time taking polls to figure out whether we're going to seize that future or not.

We can continue to spin our wheels with the old education debates, pitting teachers unions against reformers, and meanwhile, our kids keep trailing their counterparts from South Korea to Singapore. But we know that the countries that outeducate us today will outcompete us tomorrow. We know that kids who are consigned to failing schools today will be condemned to lifetimes of lower wages and unfulfilled dreams. America can't afford to wait. And I'm not going to take a poll to figure out whether or not we're going to tackle education.

We can continue to allow the same special interests who stacked the deck in favor of financial speculators in the last decade to block reform again in this decade. But if we've learned anything from the devastating recession, it's that we know that wise regulation actually can enhance the market and make it more stable and make our economy work better. We can't return to the dereliction of duty that helped deliver this recession. We know that to do so would be to put at risk our jobs, our families, our businesses, and our future. America can't afford to wait, and we can't look backwards.

And, yes, we could continue to ignore the growing burden of runaway costs of health care. The easiest thing to do right now would be to just say this is too hard; let's just regroup and lick our wounds and try to hang on. We've had a long and difficult debate on health care, and there are some, maybe even the majority in this town, who say perhaps it's time to walk away.

But here's the thing, Democrats, if we walk away, we know what will happen. We know that premiums and out-of-pocket expenses will skyrocket this decade, and the decade after that, and the decade after that, just as they did in the past decade. More small businesses will be priced out of coverage, more big businesses will be unable to compete internationally, more workers will take home less pay and fewer raises. We know that millions more Americans will lose their coverage. We know that our deficits will inexorably continue to grow because health care costs are the single biggest driver.

So just in case there's any confusion out there, let me be clear: I am not going to walk away from health insurance reform. I'm not going to walk away from the American people. I'm not going to walk away on this challenge. I'm not going to walk away on any challenge. We're moving forward. We are moving forward. Sometimes we may be moving forward against the prevailing winds. Sometimes it may be against a blizzard. *[Laughter]* But we're going to live up to our responsibility to lead.

And I'm confident that if we stay steady, if we stay focused on all the people that we meet each and every day who are out there struggling, if we've got them in mind and we are working to deliver on their behalf, that in the end that'll be good politics as well as good policy. It'll be good for America, not just good for Democrats.

But in order to get any of these battles done, we're going to have to change the way that Washington works. Now, we may not get a lot of attention for it, but we've actually already begun to do that. We've reined in the power of the special interests with the toughest ethics and transparency rules of any administration in the modern era. We're the first White House ever to post our visitors online. We've excluded lobbyists from policymaking jobs or seats on Federal boards and commissions. I've called on Congress to make all earmark requests public on one central web site before they come up for a vote, so that you know how the money is spent. We have—we're going to have to confront the gaping loophole that the Supreme Court recently opened in our campaign finance laws that allows special interests to spend without limit to influence American elections.

We also said that as we worked to change the ways of Washington, we'd also change the way we do things as a party. This committee is the first to ban contributions from political action committees and lobbyists. And I'm pleased to see the recommendations submitted by the Change Commission aimed at improving our nominating process, because I believe that the more Americans that get involved in this party, the stronger this party will be.

And, yes, we need to change the way we work with the other party as well. Now, I'm proud to be a Democrat. I'm proud to be a leader of this great party. But I also know that we can't solve all of our problems alone. So we need to extend our hands to the other side. We've been working on it—*[laughter]*—because if we're going to change the ways of Washington, we're going to have to change its tone.

Now, as a step in that direction, I went and visited with the House Republican caucus last Friday. *[Laughter]* And we had a good discussion about the challenges facing the American people and our ideas to solve them. It was good for the country to see a robust debate. I had fun. *[Laughter]*

And we have to acknowledge there are going to be some issues that Democrats and Republicans just don't see eye to eye on, and that's how it should be. That's how our democracy works. But there have to be some issues on which we can find some common ground. It's one thing to disagree out of principle; it's another to simply stand in the way because of politics.

Now is not the time for sitting on the sidelines or blocking progress or pointing figures or assigning blame. Now is not the time to do just what's right for your party or your poll numbers. Now is the time to do what's right for the country. Now is the time to do what's necessary to see us through these difficult times. Now is the time to do everything in our power to keep the American Dream alive for the next generation. And that's our mission, Democrats.

I know we've gone through a tough year, but we've gone through tougher years. We're the party of Thomas Jefferson, who declared that all men are created equal. And we had to work long and hard to ensure that those words meant something.

We're the party of Franklin Roosevelt, who, in the midst of depression, said all we had to fear was fear itself, who saved freedom and democracy from being extinguished here on Earth. And that was hard because the natural impulse was to fear. But we as a party helped to lead the country out of that fear.

We're the party of John F. Kennedy, who summoned us to serve, who called us to pay any price and bear any burden.

And we're the party of Edward M. Kennedy, whose cause endures; who said that here, in the United States of America, the promise of health care should not be a privilege, but a fundamental right.

That is who we are, Democrats. That's who we've got to be today. For all the stories we've heard, after all the campaigns we've waged, after all the promises we've made, this is our best chance to deliver change that the American people need.

And if we do that, if we speak to the hopes of the American people instead of their fears, if we inspire them instead of divide them, if we respond to their challenges with the same sense of urgency they feel in their own lives—we're not just going to win elections—elections will take care of themselves—we will once again be the party that turns around the economy and moves this country forward and secures the American Dream for another generation.

Thanks very much, everybody. God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:26 a.m. at the Capital Hilton Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Timothy M. Kaine, chairman, Democratic National Committee.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Democratic National Committee meeting.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Buckley, Raymond; Germond, Alice Travis; Honda, Mike; Kaine, Timothy M.; Lee, Barbara; Norton, Eleanor Holmes; Obama, Michelle; Sotomayor, Sonia; Tobias, Andrew.

Subjects: Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Afghanistan : U.S. policy review; Armed Forces, U.S. : "Don't ask, don't tell" policy, proposed repeal; Arms and munitions : Nuclear weapons and material :: Nonproliferation efforts; Budget, Federal : Deficit; Business and industry : Credit Card Accountability, Responsibility, and Disclosure Act of 2009; Business and industry : Global competitiveness; Business and industry : Small and minority businesses;

Civil rights : Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009; Congress : Bipartisanship; Congress : Earmark reform; Congress : House of Representatives :: Republican caucus; Democratic Party : Democratic Change Commission; Democratic Party : Democratic National Committee; Democratic Party : Lobbyist gift ban and campaign finance regulations ; Democratic Party : Nomination process, improvement efforts; District of Columbia : Democratic Party events; Economy, national : Financial regulations, modernization efforts; Economy, national : Recession, effects; Economy, national : Strengthening efforts; Education : Global competitiveness; Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act; Elections : Campaign finance laws; Employment and unemployment : Job creation and growth; Employment and unemployment : Job losses; Employment and unemployment : Unemployment rate; Energy : Alternative and renewable sources and technologies; Energy : Alternative energy products and technologies, U.S. production; Environment : Climate change; Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act of 2009; Florida : President's visit; Foreign policy, U.S. : Diplomatic efforts, expansion; Government organization and employees : Accountability and transparency, strengthening efforts; Government organization and employees : Role and disposition of lobbyists, limits on; Haiti : Earthquake, damage and recovery efforts; Haiti : U.S. assistance; Health and Human Services, Department of : State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP); Health and medical care : Cost control reforms; Health and medical care : Employer-based health insurance coverage; Health and medical care : Insurance coverage and access to providers; Iraq : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Judiciary : Supreme Court :: Associate Justice; New Hampshire : President's visit; Ohio : President's visit; Pennsylvania : President's visit; Taxation : Tax relief; Terrorism : Al Qaida terrorist group; Terrorism : Counterterrorism efforts; Terrorism : Global threat; Terrorism : Terrorists :: Interrogation procedures; Treasury, Department of the : Troubled Asset Relief Program; White House Office : Visitor logs, public release.

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